WILDLIFE HABITAT EVALUATION FOR RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

BACKGROUND:

Natural Resources Conservation Service policy of assistance on private lands has, since its inception, required that conservation practice installation be accomplished with consideration for wildlife and wildlife habitat.

Application of conservation practices is generally considered to be beneficial for wildlife. Practices such as farm ponds, grassed waterways, proper grazing management, and conservation tillage generally increase food, water, or cover and improve diversity for most wildlife species.

Practices such as brush management, drainage, timber stand improvement and pasture planting can reduce needed food and cover when applied without wildlife consideration. The effect of conservation practice installation on wildlife largely depends on practice selection and design.

It is not the responsibility of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to determine the extent to which a landowner should consider wildlife needs in their operation. Neither does the NRCS determine which particular wildlife species should be managed. These decisions are made by the landowner based on economics, legal constraints, local conditions, and his or her objectives.

Natural Resources Conservation Service personnel have a responsibility and obligation to determine and explain to the decision maker what effect a planned system of conservation practices will have on wildlife resources of the particular land unit. Decision makers must be provided with this information in order to make intelligent and informed decisions about their property. The NRCS must have this information to assess the impact of practice installation and determine if service policy requiring consideration of wildlife is being properly followed. In the past, conservation practices were often designed and installed with little thought or study given to their effects on wildlife unless the landowner indicated a specific wildlife interest.

Adoption of the total resource management policy (SWAPA) in conservation planning provides that emphasis be directed to plants, air, and animals In addition to soil and water. It requires that quality criteria be established for each In order to measure the degree to which the resource, management systems meet the quality criteria, a method of evaluation is required. A subjective evaluation based on the planner's knowledge is the simplest form. However, this method is dependent on the interest, ability, and knowledge of the planner. This

method has been widely used in the past and its success or failure has been dependent upon the wildlife training provided to planners and the technical support provided by biologists. Unfortunately, the quality and amount of wildlife management training and technical assistance provided to field office personnel since 1985 has been minimal due to other workload requirements.

The attached evaluation procedure is designed for use when planning a resource management system where wildlife is not the primary objective or intensive management for a species is not desired. This evaluation procedure is based primarily on diversity to give a general rating applicable to many different species. It addresses the primary landuses in Florida, plus specialized uses such as old field and wetlands, which provide important habitat.

INTRODUCTION:

The following evaluation is designed for use by employees who provide assistance in farm and ranch planning and who have limited training and knowledge in wildlife management. It is intended to assist decision makers in understanding the effects of various agricultural practices on wildlife and to provide documentation of the effects of Resource Management System implementation on wildlife resources.

This habitat evaluation is simplified to limit data input and the time required to complete it. It cannot be used to make detailed management recommendations required for intensive management. If the primary objective for a field or planning unit is wildlife or it is to be intensively managed, a species based wildlife habitat appraisal procedure should be used.

PROCEDURE:

(1) Identify all crop, range, forest, old field, pasture, and larger wetland areas on the tract or farm. Fields should include borders around them such as woody fence rows that divide crop fields. Hayland should be included with pasture. If a particular type of landuse does not seem to fit any of the types listed, contact the state biologist.

(2) If the tract has only one field in a habitat type, or all fields within a habitat type are similar, only one field needs to be evaluated. If the tract has fields that vary in habitat quality within a habitat type, all fields should be inventoried and a weighted average score computed. If there are significant differences in the same field, the field may be divided and more than one evaluation done. For example, if one forest field had a pine plantation on part and an old mixed pine hardwood stand on the remainder, the two areas should be evaluated separately. Note that there are separate forms for the major variations within a landuse such as crop (citrus), crop (row), and crop (EM). If more than one of these variations occurs on the farm, use the weighted average score for the landuse.

(3) Complete the worksheet inventory form (see attachments) for the appropriate field(s) and compute the score for each habitat type. This evaluation will provide information on the quality of habitat for the EXISTING CONDITION. Observing what features receive a low score will help the planner determine what could be done to improve the habitat.

(4) Repeat the evaluation for each of the Resource Management Systems being considered and determine the effects of each of these ALTERNATIVES on the wildlife resource. If the score for any existing habitat type is low, practices should be chosen which will improve habitat quality. Practices which lower habitat quality should only be chosen when they are necessary to prevent the loss of non-renewable resources, i.e., soil and water.

(5) Complete the summary sheet to determine if the selected alternative meets the quality criteria for a Resource Management System and is acceptable to the decision maker. Quality Criteria for Resource Management Systems is shown on the Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Summary Worksheet. If the minimum criteria score (.30) is not met, a Resource Management System can be not be attained.

NOTE: These forms are also available in spreadsheet format.

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